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ABSTRACT

The questions of evaluation and accountability are major issues in today's education. The responsibility of higher education is to prove that it has a purpose and is adequately fulfilling it. Continuous searching, revision, and checking are necessary, but given the leeway to work, higher education can be more effective in helping to build a better world. (Author)

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EVALUATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY: MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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"Analyzing the Report from the National Commission on the Financing of Postsecondary Education"

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There is no question that evaluation and accountability are major issues in higher education today. From local school boards to the boards of trustees of our most prestigious institutions of higher education, there is a consistent plea for increased accountability to the various publics served by the educational system and more intensive evaluation of the degree of effectiveness and efficiency with which the educational institutions of our country operate. One need only look at the substantial proportion of our gross national product which is utilized in the educational system to understand this concern. Certainly in a period of time when the world's resources are increasingly in short supply, it is only reasonable that the resources being consumed by the educational establishment be consumed wisely. No longer can the American public accept on faith the authority and/or the wisdom of those who manage our educational systems.

Unfortunately, despite the philosophical concern for evaluation and accountability, the technology available to accomplish these goals is not always equal to our philosophical commitment. To say that an institution of higher education must raise every student to a superior standard of excellence by the time of graduation regardless of one's competence on entering college, implies both the ability to measure competence when the student enters college and the ability to define a standard of excellence in a measurable way. Despite the prevalence of pre-college testing of potential college students, there is little evidence that we have an effective means of measuring a student's competence in dealing with college material except when we are talking about verbal and mathematical skills. Yet, we are aware of the fact that some of the most important factors in college success, including such things as motivation and a cosmopolitan view of the environment, are not adequately measured by the existing technology. The problem of clearly identifying a superior standard of excellence is even more difficult. Despite obvious differences in the quality

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of institutions of higher education, most college students earn grades of C or B, and almost all institutions of higher education graduate about 50 percent of their students. In addition we have little specific and particular evidence of the relationship of achievement in academic programs with achievement in other areas of life. While gross generalizations might be possible, it is difficult indeed to attribute a person's economic, cultural, and social success in life to the college he or she attended. More likely a person's success in life is a function of a wide variety of variables, of which attendance at a particular institution of higher education is only one. Therefore, while it is essential that college and university administrators be sensitive to, and aware of, the need for evaluation and accountability, they should also be aware of some of the problems which enter into evaluation and accountability efforts.

The first of these concerns is one which has been noted time and time again but which still bears repeating. There is a tendency for persons involved in evaluation and accountability to be concerned only with those elements which are easily measured. It is much easier to count the number of degrees conferred, or the number of hours taught per dollar of faculty salary expenditures, than it is to measure the quality of a particular degree program, or the quality of a particular instructional format. The advent of computer technology has made it even more popular to count things which can be easily quantified and to measure organizational and institutional success against these items. This is not to say that college administrators should not be concerned with those factors which show on the balance sheet. Rather, it is to say that considerable additional resources must be put into efforts to find ways to assist institutions in assessing their problems and their programs in terms that have more meaning than the number of degrees offered. In particular, those persons who have access to hard data and experience in using it must assume responsibility for alerting other people within the organization to the fact that these hard data, while useful, are not a complete measure of institutional performance.

A second concern which often is overlooked in discussion of evaluation and accountability is the concern for institutional diversity. Once we find a way of counting or measuring a particular thing within an institution, it is our tendency then to want to compare one institution with another and to indicate that the higher or larger number or the better measure indeed implies a better institution. In the logical extreme one could say that an institution which could teach a larger number of students in a single class and have them all learn only the minimum amount of material required might even be the best institution. Yet each of us is aware of the fact that this is not necessarily true. There are other aspects of institutional diversity which should be considered. For example, what proportion of the private church related institution's energy should be put into the development of a religious commitment on the part of its students and faculty, and what proportion of that institution's energy should be put toward the analysis of the impact of value questions on the conduct of American society? Often these are not the kinds of items which are included in common comparisons between institutions. Another kind of institutional diversity is represented by those institutions which serve particular social, economic, and cultural facets of our student population.

How do we measure the degree by which a predominantly Black institution increases the cultural awareness of its student body and of the community within which the institution exists, and how do we measure the potential contribution of that awareness of American society? In fact, it may be reasonable to ask whether or not the American society should indeed hold certain institutions accountable for their ability to contribute to self-actualization of students and an understanding of special student cultures. Institutional diversity in and of itself is a complex phenomenon and includes such items as relative curricular, social, and cultural emphasis, and each of these differs from institution to institution. Any system of evaluation and accountability which makes institutions more the same, rather than encourages institutions to develop their diverse strengths, has the danger of leveling all institutions rather than permitting each to rise to excellence in its own particular way.

The third concern with evaluation and accountability is that it tends to be limited to the effect of a single institution on the student and to ignore the fact that the student is part of the total educational system extending from head start programs through post-doctoral study. An institution might well be held accountable for factors over which it has little or no control. For example, due to cultural forces within America, a college education is supposed to take four years. Yet those institutions which get their students from more affluent socio-economic communities are often not expected to make any more progress with those students, or to have any more proficient at graduation, than those institutions which get a majority of their students from lower socio-economic communities. And yet both institutions are constrained by the fact that a college degree is a four-year degree. With the lack of criterion references we have used time references to establish processes and procedures in the educational system. Now we wish to move to criterion references, and there has been little effort to educate the American public in terms of the need to adjust the time references in education. So college and university administrators are being asked to accomplish a criterion-based goal within a time-constrained institutional setting. This ignores the total system approach which should be used in evaluation and accountability efforts.

Certainly, if properly used and executed, the move toward evaluation and accountability in higher education can be a positive influence for students, faculty, staff, administrators, and the American people. At the same time such a move could create an educational system in America that is represented by the lowest, rather than the highest, standards of achievement and comparison, and therefore it behooves us to promote the development of alternatives in the area of evaluation and accountability. We need to combine the efforts of accountants, operations researchers, and quantitative researchers with the efforts of educational philosophers and curriculum experts to develop a wide variety of schemes for the evaluation of institutions, and for having those institutions be accountable to the American public.

What gives grave cause for concern is that we do not have any real safeguards for the quality of education; national interest seems to be

primarily directed to the quantity of education. It is literally true that in many areas of our present teaching we now do very poorly. People are unable to handle simple fractions. Mahy of us appear to be illiterate in history, geography, and knowledge of the happenings of the day. Everyday mail and conversation attest that we write and speak very slovenly and this does not just apply to minorities. And for far too many people, the expression or interpretation of a slightly complex concept is next to impossible.

We must not settle for a single evaluation methodology which simply measures those things which can be counted and which does not permit and, in fact, promote institutional diversity, and which does not recognize the interrelationships of the educational and cultural systems in America.

The purpose of education is to provide people with the highest achievable understanding of humane and scientific knowledge, so that we may have a mastery of our environment, comprehension and control of ourselves, and recognition and acceptance of our human responsibilities.

If education is to prove itself a highly workable means of effecting better human relations, then that education must be the kind which considers the community at large, the quality which provides strong effective leadership, and of such extensiveness as to reach all segments of the community. It must be so geared as to provide the various ethnic and racial groups in the community with enough interest, enthusiasm, and challenge to draw them into the process. It must then offer them enough variety in experiences to appeal to the differences in ability and desires, and it must so inculcate in them the concern for all human endeavor that a close bond develops between the educational institution and the community, with the student or graduate as leader.

A brief overview of the development of Black higher education would show that enormous strides have been made since the early 1800's when only two Blacks held college degrees. But this alone, if followed in all its aspects, would prove that the education of Blacks has resulted in intense community services. This was in large measure due to the patterns of segregation everywhere existent. The college as an institution became the center of community intellectual activities, and the college graduate the leader.

Black education still has a great responsibility for providing intellectual outlets, and more particularly so because the masses of disadvantaged persons who constitute Black America are rather shy about mingling in groups which still show their unwillingness to accept them fully. The responsibility falling as it must on the traditionally and predominantly Black college also focuses attention upon problems of monetary income and financial management designed to provide adequate funds for training for such community service as is necessary and expected.

The need is there, however, and the challenge is as great, or probably greater, than ever because new facets have been added to the matter which require readjusted focus. Yet, the colleges, for the most part, have

these responsibilities--and the graduates of these colleges must be so imbued with the spirit of service, and so endowed with the ability to serve well, that the greatest possibilities accrue from a wholesome inter-relationship of community and college.

Therefore, we conclude that the questions of evaluation and accountability are major issues in today's education and that it is the responsibility of those of us in higher education to prove that it has a purpose and is adequately fulfilling it. Continuous searching, revision, and checking are necessary, but given the leeway to work, higher education can be more effective in helping to build a better world.